

## REVIEW ESSAYS

### ***The Art of Ethnographic Film and the Politics of Protesting Modernity: Robert Gardner's Forest of Bliss***

*There have never been enough workers to collect the remnants of these worlds, and just as each year several species of living creatures cease to exist, impoverishing our biological repertoire, so each year some language spoken only by one or two survivors disappears forever with their deaths. This knowledge has provided a dynamic that has sustained the fieldworker taking notes with cold cramped fingers in an arctic climate or making his own wet plates under the conditions of a torrid climate .... The emerging technologies of film, tape, video, and, we hope, the 360° camera, will make it possible to preserve materials (of a few selected cultures, at least) ... long after the last isolated valley in the world is receiving images by satellite.*

Margaret Mead [1995: 3, 9]

*To save is to fetch something home in its essence, in order to bring essence for the first time into its genuine appearing.*

Martin Heidegger [1977: 28]

At the heart of visual anthropology is the belief in cinema's ability to preserve or to save cultures supposedly disappearing in the face of the homogenization of modernity. There are two assumptions here: the first is more or less unchallenged and has to take into account the other. It assumes the imminent vanishing of the non-Western world without struggle or modification from within. The second assumption is the subject of several post-modern critiques of anthropology. This is about the assumed identification between reality and its representation. My argument in this essay is that a preoccupation with representational strategies at the cost of the specific, historical ways in which the Other is represented in relation to modernity results in perpetuating the essentialization of the West as different from the rest. I will map out my argument in relation to Robert Gardner's 1986 film, *Forest of Bliss*, and the rather fierce debate around it.

In the context of Western representations of the non-West in late 20th century, when there are no "isolated valleys" anymore, the challenge for ethnographic representation is to represent the Other not as the other of modernity but as a compatriot inhabiting, as Ahmed [1992: 103] suggests, not three but one world,

all of which is constituted by internal class divisions, by imperialism, and none is a monolith. The challenge is to show the confrontation with modernity in the non-West rather than essentialize it as pre-modern, the corollary of which is the essentialization of the West as the subject of modernity. In turning towards the non-West for a critique of modernity, the ethnographer may find a highly dialectical relation with modernity, on account of, as Marx pointed out, both its liberatory and oppressive potential, and its fundamentally revolutionary nature. The nostalgia for a pre-capitalist past expressed in relation to the non-West has implicit in it 19th century ideas about the "noble savage" who is supposedly closer to nature in comparison with the corrupt, consumerist, and materialist Westerner. In order to see the ways in which a text constructs the Other as the Other of modernity, we need to pay attention to its understandings of capitalist political economy in the specific historical context of the film, in terms of both its production in the region that forms its subject and its reception in the West.

The problem that has preoccupied ethnographic film, however, is the politics of representation considered in terms of the hegemonic discourses of otherizing that are traced back to the rise of anthropology as a modern discipline. The use of the Other as "scientific data" for analysis, classification and surveillance that provided ideological justification for imperialism through the discourses of racial evolution and what Said [1978] characterized as Orientalism has come under strong criticism. This along with developments in film theory that have discussed

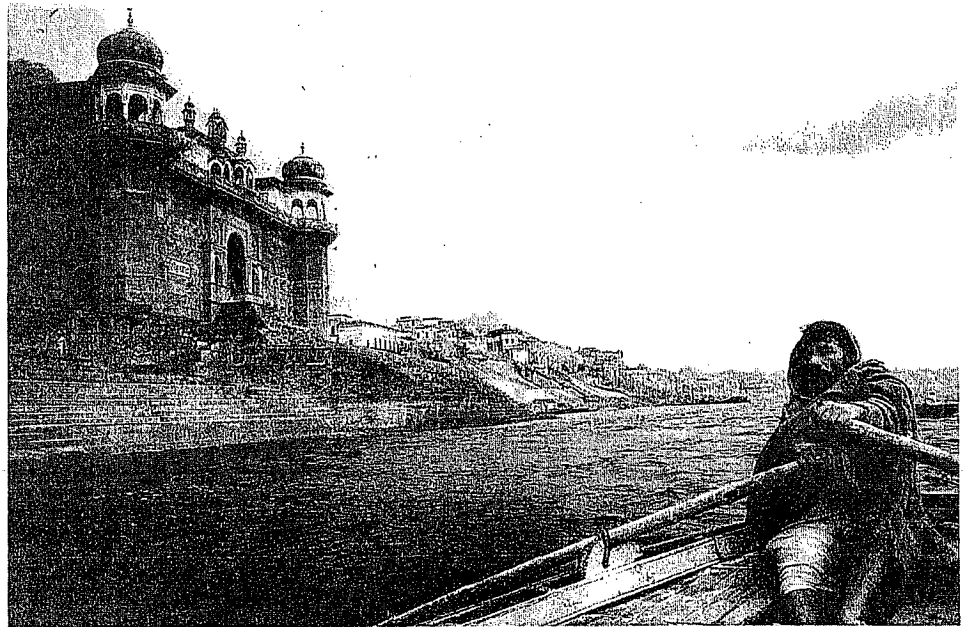


Figure 1. Boatman on the Ganges; Benares, India. Photo: Jane Tuckerman. Copyright: Film Study Center, Harvard University.

the power of the gaze and the cinematic apparatus have made it impossible to sustain belief in the cinematic image as an unmediated, uncontested representation of reality. One outcome of this critique has been works such as those by Trinh Minh-ha which are concerned not another culture but with representing the deconstruction of the anthropologizing discourse itself, based on a refusal to represent that culture. The irony of this position is that, like the otherizing discourses it criticizes, it refuses to engage with the Other as contemporary, presenting them, ultimately, as unknowable. There is, however, another trajectory, one which has a long-standing history in the field, and that is an opposition between the filmmaker as artist and the anthropologist as scientist. By claiming the position of the artist, the ethnographic filmmaker attempts a break with the modernizing impulses of anthropology by attempting to represent behavior, and facets of another culture that cannot be reduced to scientific explanations; to evoke the experience of another way of understanding the material world, and to reveal it from within that perspective rather than dismiss it as irrational, and primitive; and finally, to reveal meanings underlying apparent surfaces in order to challenge the empiricism of the notion that images provide raw or hard data that can substantiate written accounts. While this echoes romantic notions of the artist as a special individual with extraordinary powers of intuition and insight, there is a more valuable possibility in this position and that is an extension of the real to include not just that which is apparent, but also that which is hidden, such as the unconscious or ideology.

#### THE CASE OF GARDNER'S *FOREST OF BLISS*

Robert Gardner's 1986 film, *Forest of Bliss*, and the controversy it has generated are a key moment in the conceptualization of ethnographic film as art and therefore in opposition to the modernizing, and hegemonizing impulses of anthropology. The debate on the film in two issues of the *Society for Visual Anthropology Newsletter* [Fall 1988, Spring 1989] and in three recent volumes on ethnographic cinema [Loizos 1993, Taylor 1994, and Warren 1996] has centered on the film's formal strategies, the most remarkable of which is its reliance on visuals and ambient sound rather than verbal explanations, other than a quote from Yeats, to make its argument. So concerned has the discussion been with deciphering the film and its meaning in the absence of a verbal narrative that the politics of Gardner's interpretation of Banaras has gone unchallenged. In this essay I point out how Gardner's conception of art is linked to Heidegger's critiques of modernity in the West;<sup>1</sup> a criticism which is ultimately limited on account of its essentialization of India as pre-capitalist. While the film's critique of modernity resonates briefly and powerfully with a local confrontation with modernity, Gardner chooses to retain the East-West distinction by suggesting an unchanging traditional system of belief in India. In reviewing both critics and admirers of the film, I indicate how both sides of the debate, i.e., art and science, share certain common assumptions about the static, unchanging, pre-capitalist character of Banaras. These are based on the assumption that India is essentially different and that the task of the ethnographer is to reveal a central principle of

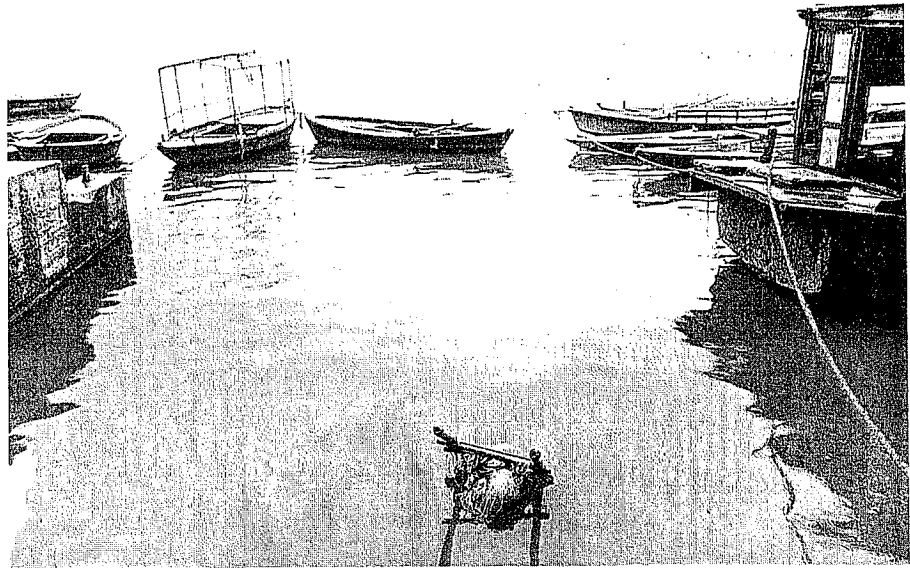


Figure 2. The Ganges at Benares. Photo: Robert G. Gardner. Copyright: Film Study Center, Harvard University.

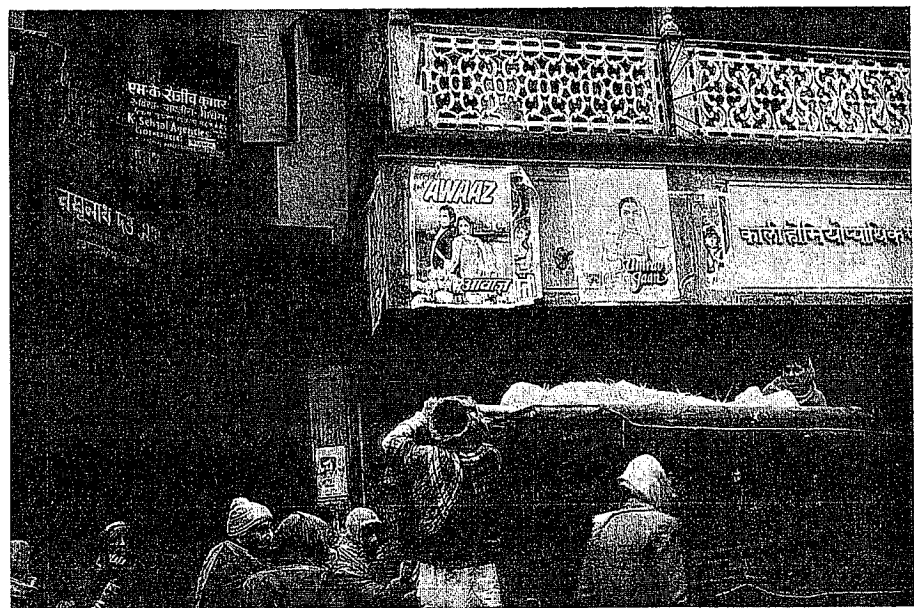


Figure 3. Street scene in Benares. Photo: Jane Tuckerman. Copyright: Film Study Center, Harvard University.

signification which can explain the apparently bizarre behavior of considering an apparently dirty river holy. It is in this, as an in-between, that Gardner does not communicate that not everything in India can be reduced to Hindu philosophy, which is itself not a monolith but constantly subject to interpretation.

*Forest of Bliss* [1986], is set in Banaras, a pilgrimage city in Northern India on the banks of the river Ganga. The significance of Banaras in Hindu tradition is that death in Banaras, it is believed, frees one from the eternal cycle of birth and rebirth. The passage to blissful freedom from the material life of this world is enabled by the river, Ganga. Ganga is worshipped as the Mother with limitless power to heal, to cleanse and absorb the dirtiness of the world. Underlying this belief is a basic philosophical conception by which the material world is considered *maya*, that is, an illusion, a mirage, a fleeting, transient, unreal moment; in comparison to a world beyond that is real, permanent, and beyond human vision. As Zimmer [1946] points out, the essential problem of human life then is to unravel this trick of sight and to free oneself from the seductions of the material world by meditating on its unreality.

#### TEXTUAL STRATEGIES OF REPRESENTATION

*Forest of Bliss* appears to be a profoundly detached meditation on the transient character of life in this world through its repeated juxtapositions of images of death and decay with those of birth and life. In a critique of Western dualities, the film seems to suggest that in Banaras, the artificially constructed oppositions between public/private, religious/profane, material/spiritual, human/animal, nature/culture, beauty/ugliness and finally life/death are all resolved in the seamless web of life. One of the repeated shots in the film is a long shot of Banaras from a boat that floats by the temples, washermen washing clothes, a boat rowed by a young man, a child's body being thrown into the river, a man peeing on the steps of the ghats, a dead body, and a dog eating a corpse. Corpses are taken through the crowded streets of Banaras past trucks, cycles, scooters, buses, rickshaws, shops, animals, beggars, and children. As Chopra [1989] points out, children fly kites along the bank of the river, where bodies are cremated. Gardner [1996] writes about a remarkable shot he was able to get of a kite drowning in the river at the same time as relatives immersed the body of a child who died flying kites. There is a repeated reference to the river as passage for both life and death, for boats and corpses, for carcasses and muscular boatmen, for ashes of the dead and ritual offerings of flowers and lamps.

Death, in the conception of the material world as *maya*, is not the end, or the negation of life, but a part of it and the beginning of another journey. A shot of a corpse lying in the courtyard of the hospice is followed by the inauguration of a boat. The ritual circling around the corpse and the new boat is remarkably similar. Wood is used to make the boat. It is also used to make the stretchers that carry the corpses. The stretchers, Staal [1989] remarks, look like ladders. Flowers, the other industry that the film follows, are put around the gods, the corpses, and new boats. They also form the garbage on the streets.

There are certain processes and people that are followed through the film that give the apparent juxtapositions an underlying sense of unity. There is at the

heart of the film, the old priest who embodies the mundaneness of the sacred in Banaras. He is the first human character we are introduced to in the film. It is early morning and he bathes in the Ganga. Right after that he dresses himself up, ties his *dhoti*, combs his hair in the mirror and applies the *tilak*, a religious mark on his forehead; just as he would after any ordinary bath. He chants the name of the goddess on his way back to the temple through beggars, religious idols, shit, dogs and acquaintances. He does not need to retreat into a silent, private sanctuary to pray. Right in the middle of what seems a trance he burps. This has no effect on the two women on whose behalf he appears to be acting as a medium. The other main character is the manager of the funerals, known as the *dom*, in whose hands death becomes very much a part of this life and its commercial transactions. He is the only character shown dealing in money and bargaining, at one time, quite aggressively for what could be charges for a cremation, timber or any of the negotiations involved with a recent death. The *dom* too, like the priest, leads a very public life, almost as if on stage. He carries on his life on a raised platform which is open on three sides, the fourth being the door to his house. As he lies on a bed a woman massages his back and another gives him a glass of milk. While he drinks his milk the latter bends down to dust the cigarette ash off the bed, looking closely for burns in the sheet.

Among the patterns of the film is a lingering on emptiness, on spaces devoid of human action. The camera returns a couple of times to the wooden scale as it swings gently in the breeze. It is on this scale that timber is weighed for both corpses and boats. The camera also returns to the empty courtyard of the hospice. This is where the corpses are laid out before they are taken out to be cremated. Once a corpse is taken out the courtyard is cleaned with water and is empty again. These empty spaces seem to erase the boundaries between life and death.

The seamlessness of the resolution between life and death is made possible by the circular narrative of the film, the repetitions of certain motifs and patterns, the slow, almost imperceptible camera movements, and the carryover of sound from one sequence to another. Hand-held shots or close-ups are rare. One remarkable close-up is on the hypnotic movements of the oars against the sounds of the creaking boat floating on the river. Floating on the river becomes a metaphor for yielding to life rather than resisting it. Another close-up is on a drop of sweat on the old priest's breast as he is in a trance, calling attention to the materiality of his body even as he momentarily escapes it in trance. There is close attention to the slowest of movements, such as the rising sun, a boat coming out of the mist, or a lame puppy limping up the steps of the ghats. The camera appears to embody the meditative stance in relation to the material world by not seeking, groping or calling attention to itself. Rather, it simply stands there in front of the flow of life.

#### ART AND BANARAS AS BULWARKS AGAINST THE COMMODIFICATION OF MODERNITY

For Gardner, it seems, as for Heidegger, the task of the philosopher or the filmmaker is to restore meaning to things, to reveal their significance, or their being"

which had been lost in the technological disclosure of all things as raw material, as commodities to be used to further expand technological power. This echoes with the confrontation with modernity both in India and in the West, in that when nothing is sacred anymore and everything is a commodity to be used, the Ganga and the belief in its eternally holy character appear to be a bulwark against the commodification of capitalism. Therefore, in this conception, to equate the river with the pollution floating in it is an empiricist fallacy which commodifies the river in terms of its usefulness for hygiene, when it has a deeper spiritual significance and that is, its powers to heal and cleanse the human soul. Gardner, then, uses the camera and film to reveal this deeper significance of the Ganga by letting the images speak for themselves. The unhurried camera, the meditative stance or "trance," as Gardner



Figure 4. Brahmin priest worshipping: Benares, India. Photo: Christopher James. Copyright: Film Study Center, Harvard University.

[1996] describes it, is an effort to let the Ganga and Banaras reveal themselves in accordance with their own integral sense of time and rootedness in space. Therefore, when the camera dwells on the corpse with its anus up, or the girls playing hopscotch against a rising sun, it is suggesting that art is not about showing that which is beautiful, but about revealing the sheer "isness" of things.

#### BANARAS AS THE OTHER OF MODERNITY

The film suggests to me that even time is not a commodity in Banaras but a continuous link with the past and future. Time in Banaras is cyclical, ruled by the rhythms of the night and day or, according to Weinberger [1996] and Östör [1989], the cosmic cycles instead of the industrial, clock time of the West. The circularity of the film's structure, its remarkably similar opening and ending, makes this point rather strongly. The film begins with a medium shot of a dog against an early morning sky and the camera follows him as he runs from the left to the right until he runs out of the frame. The next shot is of boat sails in the early mist. We come back to a long shot of three dogs eating a dog and the cries of the victim and the snarls of the attackers. This is intercut with a quote from Yeats' translation of the *Upanishads* which announces the theme of the film:

*Everything in the world is eater or eaten the seed is the food the fire is the eater*

The film ends with another sunrise, boats in the mist and a dog running against the morning sky. The minute attention to the slowness of the actions, their mundane repetitious quality, testifies to a sense of time which is lived and experienced and is not a commodity to be translated into productivity by the hour. This extends into the nature of work itself which the film seems to suggest is better integrated into life than industrial labor. A worker takes a smoke as he weaves the stretchers on which the corpses are carried. Another takes a nap on the logs of wood that he has carried. Women weave garlands while a baby sleeps nearby and a puppy plays with the flowers. While it is true that a nap on timber one has carried may not be fatal as a nap on a heavy machine, the workers in this case are as much part of a market and their labor just as alienated. In fact, unorganized by labor unions they are more vulnerable to the market and the feudalistic controls of caste. In one crucial sense, however, Gardner extends the sense of time as something to be lived and experienced to the film itself, and that is by refusing to be economical or efficient with it. Sequences and ideas are repeated over and over again. The resulting impression, however, is not of meaninglessness but one of completeness, and the repetitions reinforce the typicality of what we see.

#### THE CONTEMPLATION ON DEATH AND THE PROTEST AGAINST MODERNITY

The film's contemplation on death, on the materiality of the human body, is at the center of its critique of modernity. Confronting the inevitability of death,



according to Zimmermann [1990], was for Heidegger the ultimate antidote to the Will to control which had fostered several disastrous projects of the technical age. Facing up to the finitude of human life, as people in Banaras seem to do, would make it possible to accept and adapt to the environment rather than attempt to change it. To me the film seems to suggest that Banaras is beautiful not in the conventional sense of picturesque landscapes or exotic sights but because of its ability to let things be, which is ultimately passive. Banaras is beautiful because it is passive. It is definitely possible to conceive of the notion of *maya* as passive. After all it is a meditation on the unreality of the material world, and action draws one more into the world rather than frees one from it. The only freedom possible is through death. In *Forest of Bliss*, however, the focus is on the materiality of this life, on the inevitability of physical decay in this life, and its endless repetitions in a circular fashion over and over again implying that human beings can do nothing to change the destiny they have been thrown into.

#### WHY BANARAS?

Why did Gardner have to go to Banaras to reflect on the inevitability of death or the mortality of human life? Why not reflect on the crash of the spaceship Challenger as a perfect antidote to the modernist effort to conquer time and space and transcend the limits of the human body? The answer to this as I have tried to indicate is that there is a certain resonance in Gardner's critique of Western dualities with the local philosophical conception of the world as *maya*. However, that is not all. In order to reflect on the innate significance of things rather than their usefulness as raw material, M.E. Zimmermann [1990] points out that Heidegger had to resort to the notion of essence. Similarly, for Gardner the core of Banaras and Ganga is their acceptance and transcendence of death. In Banaras, the film seems to suggest, people have done the same thing for generations in the same place. So rampant is the belief in the other-worldliness of Banaras among the film's reviewers, particularly its admirers, that Weinberger [1996: 163] writes that it is the "nature of his subject, Banaras, India," that "cannot help but insert the film into myth." "Banaras", Weinberger continues, "is at least 3000 years old, and the oldest continually inhabited city on earth.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it always has had the same primary function, as the place where countless dead are burned or dropped into the Ganges, and the living purified. To visit the sacred zones of the city, along the river, is like finding priests of Isis still practicing in Luxor. No other living city exists so purely in mythic time."

The film's circular structure, its seamless resolution of contradictions, represents a society that is essentially static. As Chopra writes, this film could have been called "A Day in the Life of the City of Death". The implication is that this is a day like any other, a day in which everything happens and yet nothing happens. Robert Gardner found this Banaras in 1985, he would have found the same Banaras in 1947, the year of India's independence, and probably the same Banaras would wait for him in the future as well. As Marcus [1986] points out,

conflict is essential to cultures, and Henrietta Moore [1990] argues that cultures are riddled with contradictions, always changing and not whole or static in any sense.

#### BANARAS AS THE AUTHENTIC OTHER OF MODERNITY

In contrast to the rootlessness of modernity Banaras represents "authenticity", the experience of people rooted in time and space. Time in Banaras is circular and connected in an unbroken chain with the past and present. As for space, it is enclosed within the city of Banaras and the river Ganga which has flown past it unchanging for centuries. It is this reinstatement of authenticity, of fundamental



Figure 5. Funeral pyre; Benares, India. Photo: Christopher James. Copyright: Film Study Center, Harvard University.

principles, or what Chopra [1989] calls the "central paradigm of Hindu civilization," that echoes with the Hindu right wing's claims about India as essentially Hindu and different from the West.

It is only by inserting Banaras into myth and emptying it of history that Gardner can sustain the film's narrative about the unchanging character of Indian tradition. Subsequently it can be claimed that the film is not about Banaras at all but about the inevitability of death. It is in this vein that Weinberger [1996: 165] writes about the film as Gardner's "seeing through Banaras into the cycles of life and death". The real, historical Banaras then becomes in Chopra's words a "text" and a closed one, I may add, whose conflict with modernity is settled for ever. Urban waste is culturally neutral, in that it is a by-product of modernity and is difficult to fit into an otherizing discourse unless the subject of the film is pushed out of history and so is the urban waste. The film makes an abstraction of the very material decay of Banaras, its Third World character, unplanned urbanization, crowded streets, hard manual labor, and bad sanitation facilities, by equating these to human death. The suggestion is that underdevelopment is as natural, inevitable and transient as death.

#### STILL, QUESTIONS ABOUT THE AMBIGUITY OF IMAGES ...

The careful, what Cavell [1996] rightly calls the "rhetorical," structure of the film makes it difficult to understand Parry's criticism that it represents India as an "ineffable world apart which must elude our comprehension. No explanation is possible: All we can do is stand and stare. So let the camera roll" [1988: 7]. Similarly Ruby claims that this is an "impressionist" documentary of "exotic cultures made by filmmakers who know little about the people who[m] they depict" [1989: 9]. Parry's refusal to see the meanings and connections that the film makes, and even more Moore's, is related primarily to its use of images rather than words, whether in the film or as accompanying text. Moore asks for a commentary, voice-over or subtitles that would make the "beautiful images fully intelligible, and not heathenry being filthy" [1988: 1]. At times it appears that the critics' demand for verbal explanation calls for an illustrated lecture that would end whatever ambiguity there is to the images. I have argued so far that the absence of voice-over or subtitles does not make the text open-ended. Rather, the repetitions, the patterns and the unity of juxtapositions through a circular structure are ways in which the narrative unfolds itself.

There is in fact a remarkable similarity between Gardner and the hostile reviews of the film in the consideration of Banaras as an essentially different world. While Gardner offers the essence of Banaras, the critics want details whose significance lies once again in cultural difference between East and West. Therefore when the reviewers bring up the fact that certain practices seem abhorrent to modern sensibilities they want an explanation in some system of indigenous belief rather than underdevelopment or in the contested nature of the relationship between the two. Moore [1988] calls for an interview with a sanitary bureaucrat explaining that these practices are illegal. Parry [1988], an anthropologist who has worked in the city, explains the significance of the

carriers of the corpse being reminded to take it feet-first into the ghats. The factor that separates the admirers from the hostile reviewers is that the former are able to see that in an important sense the film is not about "them" but about "us", that it is about the universal human condition of mortality. Where I differ from both positions is that both "us" and "them" are embroiled together not only in some basic human condition of mortality but also in development and underdevelopment which are related to capitalism. The film presents the materialism of India's underdevelopment not as a historical problem but as a uniquely cultural phenomenon. For instance, the defecating on roads or in the river is assumed either to be illegal or a matter of some innate cultural belief when it may simply indicate what is apparent—a lack of public toilets. Moreover, this may not smoothly resolve itself into a traditional belief as the film indicates but may actually threaten it.

#### THE HISTORICAL MOMENT OF *FOREST OF BLISS*

At the time of the making of the film there was a national debate on the very issues that the film raises—the viewing of Ganga as eternally pure because of its sacred character vs. the obvious material decay of the river. In 1985, the Ganga to the north of Banaras had caught fire and this brought its present state of decay to public attention with a new force. There were three players in this debate: the government under Rajiv Gandhi who initiated the Ganga Action Plan with funds from the World Bank, the US Environmental Protection Agency, France, Holland and West Germany; citizen's action groups such as the Clean Ganga project led by Veer Bhadra Misra, who is both the head priest of a Hindu temple and also a professor of Hydraulic Engineering at Banaras Hindu University; and the Hindu right wing who claimed that belief in Ganga's purity was central to Hindu belief. Both the Hindu right and the Rajiv Gandhi government maintained the dualities of Western vs. Indian, scientific vs. religious, modern vs. traditional, rational vs. beyond rational, as a matter of faith. Talking about Rajiv Gandhi's inability to understand what he considered obscurantist and irrational belief in Ganga's purity, one of his advisors reported, "He just can't understand such mythology when we are about to enter the 21st century" [Weaver 142]. Although slightly modified, Gandhi's policy was a continuation of imperial disgust at the pre-modern, non-scientific natives. In 1987, police vigilance was set up along the bank to stop people from defecating, throwing carcasses, sewage or waste in the river.

In highlighting the conflict over Ganga in terms of tradition and modernity, its situatedness in the very modern problems of state control, business interests and underdevelopment was largely ignored. As M. C. Mehta, an activist who filed a petition in the Supreme Court against the industries and municipalities that line the banks of the Ganga, pointed out, 30 percent of the pollution was from the factories on the banks and 70 percent from the cities whose urban waste flows directly into the river [*Multinational Monitor*, 1995: 29]. The citizens' group did not deny the traditional belief but recognized that the pollution in the Ganga was man-made and therefore could be cleaned up by human action.

Despite the Hindu right's condemnation of it as sacrilegious, the most popular Bombay film in 1985 was *Ram teri Ganga maili* (Ram, your Ganga has become dirty).<sup>3</sup> The song which blared on street corners was from the title of the movie, which lamented, *Ram teri Ganga maili ho gayi, papiyo ke paap dhote, dhote* (Ram, your Ganga has been dirtied by years of washing the sins of the sinners!) The story is about a young virginal hill girl who is seduced by a city man and ends up in the city, a prostitute. From mother to whore, Ganga made that transition rather easily in pop culture, but neither in the view of the Hindu right nor in Gardner's portrayal. The film, *Ram Teri ...* is also nostalgic for a pre-industrial, pre-urban time in much the same way as *Forest of Bliss* except that in the former that time is lost while in the latter it has been found and is preserved.

There is not even a hint in the film that there was such a controversy. It is not that the filmmakers were unaware of the controversy. As Östör, the producer of the film, wrote in defense against the criticism that they had portrayed only India's, poverty: "It did not take this film to put pollution on the map. India's free press did that and continues to do that." Moreover, Östör continued, "We avoided any sensationalism about the problems of Banaras. We did not conceal nor did we call attention to the social and ecological problems of Banaras" [1989: 4]. I agree this does not sensationalize the problems of Banaras. On the contrary it underscores them. It does put Banaras' pollution on the map, but presents the Hindu fundamentalist version of it in the context of Indian politics. In the context of international politics, it makes Banaras' ecological problem not one of underdevelopment but one of cultural interpretation.

#### THE CONTRADICTIONS OF CONTESTING REALITY WITH REALIST REPRESENTATION

The problem with the film is that even as it suggests that "reality" is always a matter of interpretation it does not point out the alternatives that contest it. The closed structure of the film, and the absence of other voices, do not challenge its truth claims. Declaration of subjectivity on the basis of artistic putting-together of images then is simply a formal device. Weinberger, in praise of the film, argues that art is able to show the complexity of reality that science cannot even approach. As I have indicated, reality is contested, bitter and far from resolved than by the resolutions presented in the film. There are for me only two funny sequences that show the contradictions, the push-and-shove relationship with modernity. One is the *dom* being given a shot in his backside, in full public view, after a consistent portrayal of his traditional power. The second such instance is when a flower-seller reaches across, pulling the woman who is buying flowers from him, to make way for a cow. The cow brushes past the woman and leisurely walks out of frame. The confrontation with modernity in India is full of such ironies of the everyday. Also not all contradictions are full of irony or necessarily funny.

The dilemma of the film lies in its strong commitment to realism at the level of representation at the same time as it attempts to question if reality can ever be known. Williams [1985: 216-21] indicates the complex history of the term realism

in Western art and philosophy which by the 19th century could imply two contradictory positions. The pre-18th century sense of the term was a Platonic belief in the objective and absolute existence of universals which formed the basis of the distinction between the apparent and the real that underlay it. The 19th century sense of realism, on the other hand, is that of concrete, materialist existence in opposition to abstract notions of some underlying truth or quality. On the one hand, *Forest of Bliss* holds the idealism of the first position by seeing in Banaras the universal truth of human mortality. It denies the material reality of Ganga's pollution in favor of the underlying belief in its sacred character. It does so, however, through a constant reiteration of the apparent, by presenting its representation as an accurate version of reality. Ethnographic cinema, in fact, cannot but invent "reality" because of its realist representations of a historical world. As Bazin [1967] pointed out, in the early years of cinema, cinema had an indexical relation to reality. *Forest of Bliss* does not challenge this indexical relation to reality.

In establishing an unbroken connection between reality and representation, the film is tied to certain basic conventions of ethnographic cinema. The most fundamental of these is a denial of selection of images on the part of the filmmaker. This is done in two ways. One is novel to the film in that, while Gardner's authorial control in the editing process, in the craft of putting together the images, is highly visible there is an equally deliberate attempt at presenting a lack of control at the time of the filming.<sup>4</sup> As Trinh [1991: 53] mentions, "shooting an image is never fortuitous". However, the meditative stance of the film seems to indicate a static viewer past whom the images floated<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, Marvin Barrett writes, "Gardner's camera is unblinking-unhurrying-nerveless. It never fusses or intrudes, although it is present at the most intensely private moments. The result is that one sees life (and death) with a steadiness and concentration that nervousness and cleverness could never offer" [1986: 91]. The absence of subtitles and voice-over further enhances this sense of unmediated reality. Images form the "raw data" which are arranged and rearranged by the fine craft of the filmmaker. It is here that the distinction between science and art begins to slip.

The second way in which the film establishes its connections with reality is the conventional denial of people's awareness of their being filmed because that immediately refers to the subjectivity of the filmmaker. The ethnographic encounter has probably been the hardest to stage within the realist mode.<sup>6</sup> There are at least two instances in the film when the subjects refer to the filming process. Quite early in the film there is a shot of a group of men lifting heavy logs of wood. Beginning with a low angle shot of a man silhouetted against the sun as he lifts a log of wood we go on to see a lively conversation between the men. Clearly aware of the camera, although not looking at it, one among them who is probably the overseer asks them to lift the wood and stop watching the "show". In a later sequence two persons are carrying the carcass of a donkey and they say, "photo's been taken." The *dom's* bargaining too seems to be acted out for the camera and there are some people who seem to be watching him and the camera. Subtitles in this case could have placed Gardner and the subjects as

contemporaries rather than frame the latter as existing in another time, which Fabian [1983] points out is the classic maneuver by which ethnography constructs its Other. Indicating the contested nature of the filming movement could rupture the glass bubble in which the people of Banaras seem to live untouched by any outside presence.

Cavell [1996: xxvii] claimed in his introductory remarks at the film's premiere that there is "virtual absence of awareness on the part of the living subjects of the film that they are under surveillance by the camera." It is absurd to imagine non-awareness of subjects of their being filmed anywhere in the world. Even India! India has the largest film industry in the world and film is part of everyday life. In fact, a film song is one of the ambient sounds in *Forest of Bliss*. On-location shoots attract crowds. However, Cavell is right in that the subjects do not appear to be under surveillance; for at the moment of filming it is probably Gardner who is under surveillance! The subjects are not in a panopticon, they look back, evade and comment. What is crucial is how the subjects are finally integrated into the film. If they in the final piece become representatives of timeless tradition they become objects, as they do in this case.

#### HOW COULD *FOREST OF BLISS* HAVE BROKEN THE INDEXICAL CONNECTION WITH REALITY?

From within the tradition that the film represents the answer is non-representational art. For how else can art represent a world that is ultimately *maya* or an illusion that is inaccessible to human vision? Such art has to be necessarily non-representational and fleeting, like the Tibetan monks who make *mandalas* that are immersed in water, the *rangoli* patterns that women make every morning to be dusted off the next morning and replaced by new ones, or the numerous Hindu gods and goddesses who are recognized as images of a metaphysical "reality" that is beyond the reach of human vision. Gardner would have had to destroy the film as it was made, immerse it in the river or replace it with a new one, until we get the idea that it is only a failing attempt at representing what is not there. There is another major characteristic of religious and folk art and that is the anonymity of the artist. How can a highly authorial film like *Forest of Bliss* fit into such a conception? Through its definite opening and closings, its circular narrative and its rootedness in Banaras where life begins and ends, *Forest of Bliss* radically departs from the conception of a metaphysical reality that is included in the notion of *maya*. In *Forest of Bliss* there never is the possibility of a rupture in this eternal cycle of birth and rebirth and instead of the metaphysical world that is real, it is *this* world, here and now, that becomes real and permanent, constantly dying and regenerating itself with no reason, other than simply because it is. Just as there are no reasons to be uncovered for the biological death of the human body other than its materiality, there are no reasons for the decay of Banaras or Ganga.

## CONCLUSIONS

Finally then we are confronted by the central paradox of the film. Reality, the film seems to suggest, is ultimately incomprehensible and the search for reasons in fact takes away from it its mystery and its sacred character. However, there are no challenges in the text to its claims of realist, accurate representation of Banaras, either through contemporary contested interpretations, such as the debate in India, or through formal strategies of self-reflexivity that would indicate the subjectivity and fragility of Gardner's interpretation. Critics of the film have claimed that the film deliberately mystifies India. What I have tried to argue so far is that it is not India that the film mystifies but underdevelopment; that it confronts the materialism of the human body but denies the materialism of underdevelopment; that it establishes the materiality of the human body but makes its own act of interpretation purely one of sight and intellect, the most non-material of the senses.

Gardner's choice of Banaras as the subject and the formal strategy of purely visual narration need to be contextualised in relation to its criticism of modernity both in the West and how it resonates with a similar criticism in India. As I indicated, the search for authenticity and central principles of signification resonate with the Hindu political right in India. Instead of a rejection of modernity that the film represents, it is only a dialectical relationship to modernity, a critique of its commodification of the river along with the modernist search for historical reasons for its decay and belief in human action to act upon them that can make it possible for the river to survive. For a moment the film opens up the exciting possibility of revealing another perspective, another relationship to the material world from within that world, but is finally dragged down by its search for essences and authenticity which constructs Banaras as the Other of modernity, without internal contradictions or conflicts.

From providing "raw data" for written monographs to claiming itself as "art" or "artifice", from ethnographic to ethnopoetic, is for ethnographic cinema a dramatic movement which highlights the relations of power that underlie any knowledge. The problem, however, as I have argued in this essay, is that a focus on representational strategies alone, on the text alone rather than the specific historical context, continues to treat the Other as absent from the present. I may well be reminded that there has been another Indian reviewer of *Forest of Bliss*, Radhika Chopra, whose opinion is the opposite of mine, who sees in the film a substantially true picture of the essence of Indian civilization. By criticizing the search for essences from a historical-materialist perspective, I have tried to indicate the inadequacy of the insider/outsider opposition in ideological analyses of ethnographic texts. Any textual analysis of a regular Hollywood or Bombay film begins by locating the film in a particular historical context, by investigating the ways in which it articulates with that particular context. The lack of a discussion of historical context and an obsession with representational strategies and hegemonic discourses in ethnographic film criticism assumes the absence of the Other from history, an assumption as profoundly Otherizing as the texts it attempts to criticize.



## NOTES

1. Making the connection between Heidegger and Gardner was for me the most productive insight into the film and its politics. I am grateful to Tom Gunning for making this suggestion. Although Staal mentions in his review of the film that Gardner sent him some articles by Heidegger, I had not pursued this. I also wish to thank Chuck Kleinhans, Judy Hoffman, Margaret Drewal and Radha Subramanyam for comments and suggestions.
2. [Weinberger's statement, certainly not original to him, is totally unsupported by archaeology, and reflects only the lamentable fact that so few South Asian scholars today are informed about contemporary Near Eastern archaeology. The double errors he perpetrates in one sentence are: (a) there is no archaeological evidence pushing the urbanization of the Banaras site back earlier than the Indian Iron Age; late Harappan cities did not occur east of Meerut. It is true that in the time of the Buddha, some 2500 years ago, Banaras was known as a holy place of lakes and groves, and that Period I at Rajghat, in the eastern suburbs of the present city, can be dated 800–200 B.C. (b) The oldest continually inhabited city *on earth* is Jericho, so far as we know: there is a virtually unbroken archaeological record reaching back to the Pre-pottery Neolithic A some 10,000 years ago. Numerous other Near Eastern cities, too, such as Jerusalem, have reason to claim greater antiquity than Banaras. Indeed Luxor, which Weinberger mentions, is still occupied today after at least 4,000 years (XI Dynasty or earlier).  
The problem that writers like Weinberger create for themselves is this: if Banaras, a city closely connected with the Indo-Aryan languages and religious traditions, is to be accorded an origin before the Aryans were in that area of North India, then who built it? Wishful thinking that Hinduism is incredibly ancient has to be weighed against the (lack of) archaeological evidence.—*Editor*].
3. It is important to remember, as Sarkar [1993] points out, that in 1985, the Hindu right had not yet acquired the kind of public significance it did in the '90s after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, an historical mosque demolished in an organized act of rampage by a combination of Hindu fundamentalist groups. Yet after the assassination of Indira Gandhi and the anti-Sikh pogrom that followed it in 1984, the definition of nationalism in aggressively Hindu chauvinist terms was on the upswing.
4. As an aside, it seems that part of the rancor expressed about the uselessness of the film is due to its meditative quality, as opposed to its being out there, doing hard work which Pinney [1990] calls the Protestant work ethic that has provided a "privileged ontological vocabulary" to ethnographic work.
5. Once again this is not my idiosyncratic observation. Weinberger, Cavell, and Östör all point to the meditative qualities of the film. Loizos' [1993: 163] commentary on the film includes a photograph of Gardner as he stands behind the camera. In the background is the Banaras landscape separated by the river Ganga. Gardner is not looking directly at Banaras. In fact, he looks away into some immeasurable distance. Nor does he look into his camera. The caption states, "Robert Gardner ... during the filming of his meditation upon death, *Forest of Bliss*."
6. This comes out most powerfully in *King Kong* [1936] and *Grass* [1925], both made by Schoedsack and Cooper. One is a documentary and the other a fiction film. In *Grass*, in spite of an announcement at the end that the filmmakers were the first foreigners to complete the migratory trek with the Bakhtiari tribe, the team just slips into the Bakhtiari tribe, who show no curiosity about them, ask no questions, but quietly go on with their migration. In contrast, the first sight of the natives in *King Kong* is an extravaganza of the senses. The natives are engaged in all that is taboo in the West—cannibalism, nudity, excessive sexuality, and crowds. The ethnographic team watches

hidden from behind a tree until the native chief spots them and soon enough asks for the "golden woman", the only white woman on the team.

7. As an aside, it is television that comes closest to the conception of the last cosmic cycle as the *Kāliyūg*, supposedly characterized by images and speed, both of which make reflection impossible.

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